SCOTT FITZPATRICK
MISSOURI STATE AUDITOR

Butler County Public Administrator
Investigative Summary

Summary of Significant Complaint(s) reported:
The State Auditor's Office received a complaint alleging that the Butler County Public Administrator failed to timely pay funeral expenses for decedent estates.

Background:
The Public Administrator is the court-appointed personal representative for wards or decedent estates of the Circuit Court, Probate Division. The Butler County Public Administrator was Jeff Darnell. He was elected in 2021 and resigned effective October 31, 2025. A new Public Administrator was appointed on November 26, 2025. Our office previously audited the Butler County Public Administrator's office as part of the county-wide audit. The audit report, Report No. 2024-087, *Butler County*, issued in October 2024 included findings that the Public Administrator charged wards excessive and unreasonable fees that did not reflect actual time spent handling ward finances and did not file timely annual and final settlements.

Methodology:
To investigate the complaint, we reviewed the previous audit report, decedent estate annual and final settlements, and policies and procedures for handling ward and estate funds.

Complaint Review:
The Public Administrator did not file some annual and final settlements timely. However, for the cases reviewed, we noted no issues with payments for funerals, burial, or end of life service payments. Our review of the 5 of 14 decedent estates with activity noted the Public Administrator did not file annual or final settlements for 3 of them. The Public Administrator was assigned 1 of the estates in April 2023. In December 2023, the Probate Court issued the Public Administrator a citation for failure to file settlements. For another estate, the court noted the initial estate inventory was delinquent twice before it was filed and issued a citation to the Public Administrator for failure to file the final settlement after at least 3 notices that the settlement was due. In the other case, a potential heir pursued action to get the Public Administrator to file the annual settlements after the court sent the Public Administrator several notices that the settlements were due. Sections 473.540 and 475.270, RSMo, require the Public Administrator to file an annual settlement and final settlement with the court for each ward or estate. As noted, similar issues existed during our prior audit.

Conclusion:
The Public Administrator did not file annual and final settlements timely as we similarly noted in our prior audit report. Timely filing of annual and final settlements is necessary for the court to properly oversee the administration of cases and reduce the possibility that errors, loss, theft, or misuse of funds will go undetected. Our review found no indication of improper governmental activity related to the payment of funeral expenses. In addition, the Public Administrator noted in the complaint is no longer in office and a new Public Administrator was appointed in November 2025. We will close the investigation with a recommendation to the new Public Administrator to ensure annual and final settlements are prepared timely for all estates.